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Poetry of Rees Nielsen

A Fool's Bargain

It was the early 1960's
I must have been 9
10 years old
my father gave me
a twenty dollar bill
and turned me loose into the midway
of the Big Fresno Fair
you can't imagine
for there are more than seven wonders in the world
when you are nine
as I walked past
the chameleons
leashed and clipped to your shirt
and the turtles with painted shell
past
the cotton candy booth
and the canisters filled with
all kinds of plastic swords and ray guns
above in the vast night
huge creaking contraptions
spun neon cartwheels
into the heavens
whirling with the screams
of the faithful
riding the October stars
as magnificent as God
in his turban

A man called me
specifically
out of the crowd
"You, boy, three throws,"
and he pointed with a cane
to a plethora of stuffed toy
and various plunder
"wins any of these!"
he winked and added,
"You look like a boy with a strong right arm"
I had promised myself all along
to show some control
my old man didn't shell out
twenties
every day of the week
but the barker had appealed to my vanity
and the concept,
just three throws
knock the dolls off the ledge
It wasn't that I wanted that cheesy five foot tall
turquoise panda
already split at the seam
but three measly dolls!
On the first two throws I took them down

but I missed that third
and so it went
through the entire
twenty
on the last three I took two off the ledge
with authority
hit the third doll square on the nose
but the dam thing didn't even rock
back and forth
the ball bounced back
like I was throwing at a stone wall
before I could object
before I could demand
to examine that doll
the man was hawking up another fool
out of that salmon run
of fools
right then and there
I promised myself
that I would never do that again

Today
after 27 years
of struggle and endless labor
I have hit that dam third doll
again
it is time to face
the inevitable
I will lose the land,
maybe the house too
I promise
I will never do this again

Two Selections from "The Valiant Sparrow"

There's a piece of me
that broke off
wandered into the crowd
took up a life of its own
I can see it
up ahead
here and there
like a child
with a balloon
at the fair
I race after
This twitching leg
or hand
severed, like her reflection trapped
in a broken mirror
I can feel it
as real as rain
but when I look
there is nothing there

the stump
that memory of her
on our honeymoon
wearing my old zarape
an impending tragedy
set in motion
so many years ago
o baby
I thought we were going to go on
forever
like a waterfall
before striking the rocks below
all those hoops we jumped through
o baby
31
years
3 children
where did you go?
We had all the right reasons
lined up like arrows in a quiver
and now, after all that,
these shards in my hands
are all that's left of my heart

I should have sliced my heart
so razor thin
for you to see
the rings of joy
you wore into that tapestry
that you wove of me

There were so many things
I forgot tell you
One day
you said "I've had a long life,"
resigned
in a tone you had never used before

right then
and there
I should
have explained
the ten thousand
splendiferous
whys of you?

Rees Nielsen left Callison College while in Bangalore, India, in 1971 to travel across Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey to Europe before returning to Santa Cruz, CA. He was published in *Sundaz* and *Big Moon* magazine and gave a reading at Zachary's restaurant in the poetry/short story series presided over by Morton Marcus. In 1976, he farmed near Selma, in San Joaquin Valley where he married Riina. He farmed for 30 years with Alfred Hanson. In the fall of 2003, the two lost all but 28 acres as a result of falling prices. He worked as a farm manager for McClarty Farms, Parlier, CA. In 2008, Riina died. The last two poems are excerpts from a longer poem dedicated to her memory. He has written his entire life, encouraged by his cousin Nels Hanson. He now lives in Indianola, Iowa, with two wonderful grandchildren, Marshall and Adelaide Taylor.

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